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ABSTRACT

Composition instructors need to explore the idea that the value of the discourse they teach students is not in its similarity to--but rather in its difference from--the discourse of most of the professionally-oriented departments. Scholars in fields as diverse as composition and engineering ascribe profoundly different meanings to "academic discourse." A composition instructor's work in writing across the curriculum showed her, often in embarrassing ways, that she was training her students in first-year composition to do nothing more than write papers for her particular class. In questions like plagiarism and fair use and attributions, the differences among disciplines are profound, since they touch on questions of value and ethics which reveal contradictory assumptions about the nature of knowledge. The compromises composition instructors make or are asked to make to accommodate the teaching of composition to the needs of other disciplines are uneasy (and perhaps unethical), which may explain the tension that often emerges in first year composition. Until composition instructors admit that what they do is useless to professional training as, for instance, the study of literature, they will be harnessed to the team of "academic discourse" and will be judged by their students' performance at modes of discourse that they do not privilege, teach, or fully understand. (Contains four notes.) (RS)

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Academic Discourse and Academic Service: Composition vs. WAC in the University

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Last August my university faced, for a peculiar combination of reasons, an unexpectedly large enrollment in English 101--First Year Composition. Amidst the usual discussion and hand-wringing among faculty and administrators, the president insisted that, no matter how we did it, every student who had tested into English 101 must actually be provided with a place in an English 101 class that semester. I like to think that at least part of the rationale behind this insistence was the trickling up of a concept my department has been pushing for years: that first year Composition serves to prepare students to read and write the academic discourse that they will continue to learn to manipulate as they proceed through their general education and their majors. This idea of composition as preparation for academic discourse is pretty standard among composition directors and composition textbook writers. It was perhaps most clearly articulated by Erika Lindemann in College English last spring: "Freshman English does what no high school writing course can do: provide opportunities to master the genres, styles, audiences, and purposes of college writing. Freshman English offers guided practice in reading and writing the discourses of the academy and the professions. That is what our colleagues across the campus

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want it to do; that is what it should do if we are going to drag every first-year student through the requirement" (312). And yet despite the common sense and the political usefulness of this position, I am beginning to suspect that I am using it as a kind of academic throw rug, under which I am sweeping a lot of difficult problems that I would prefer not to face.

I am beginning to look at first year composition less and less as a training ground for academic discourse.[1] Indeed, I am no longer sure that there is any such unified, stable entity as "academic discourse," nor do I accept without question the old saw that despite our quibbles about details, we all agree in general about the nature of "good writing." Even within my department, a Humanities department, the philosophy, history, and English faculty do not agree about what we should be teaching in writing classes or about what constitutes good or even acceptable college writing. The English faculty, most of whom have some background in and sympathy for current Composition research and theory, espouse a process-oriented approach to writing, use collaborative learning and writing practices, and value the exercise of critical intelligence and the development of a strong personal voice in undergraduate writing. Other members of the department care very strongly about sentence structure and the perfection of standard English conventions. These are not, of course, differences unique to my department; the difficulties composition faculty have with the process of educating faculty in other fields about what we do and why are legendary. And even

within the English section of the department there is discussion and conflict over the relative attention that should be paid to issues of language and rhetoric and about what kinds of written products we should expect from our students. When we "go public" to confer with other departments, we may disregard our internal contradictions about what constitutes "academic discourse" for the sake of some sort of consensus. But that consensus is, we must remember, a compromise position, a position with which few of us actually agree. Even so, our intra-departmental disagreements look shallow when I consider the gulf between the discourses we privilege and those privileged by the engineers in the next building. Although we may all talk about "academic discourse," I am uncomfortably aware that we ascribe profoundly different meanings to that term.

My work in Writing Across the Curriculum has repeatedly shown me, often in embarrassing ways, the very limited extent to which I am training my students in first year composition to do anything other than to write papers for my particular class. Designing writing across the curriculum projects with faculty and students in other departments has supported my suspicions (and my students' certainty) of how little that goes on in a composition class is directly useful to, for example, writing lab reports in metallurgical engineering. And, worse, I find myself continually making mistakes when I assume similarities between the conventions of critical writing and the conventions of scientific writing, mistakes which have made me increasingly aware of how

much basic research needs to be done in the discourses of various professions. If what I write and what my friends in mechanical engineering write are both examples of "academic discourse," the term is general enough to be almost devoid of meaning. But if what I write is "academic discourse" and what engineers write isn't, that is, if we truly write different discourses, then why should my engineering students want to learn to write as I do?

I have usually tended to pacify such doubts by reassuring myself that I do know a lot about discourse analysis, that I can certainly analyze and represent the crucial differences among disciplinary discourses. I suspect, however, that buried somewhere deep under that rug is the assumption that at the core of the differences among academic discourses there is an essential agreement. I want to explore a bit the implications of some of the dissimilarities and to suggest that we may be assuming an underlying agreement merely because we have not fully recognized those differences.

One such difference is connected with the issue of plagiarism. In the course of my participation in my school's ethics across the curriculum program, I attended a series of discussions about plagiarism and fair attribution. It was disconcerting how quickly the locus of disagreement shifted from how to prevent plagiarism to how to define it. I used to think I knew with some certainty what plagiarism is--submitting someone else's words or ideas as your own--and that it is wrong because it involves both stealing another person's intellectual property

and claiming achievement that you have not actually acquired. It is important, I would tell my students, to give people fair credit for their ideas. But it became clear in the course of my discussions with faculty from across the university that the issue of fair attribution is not simple or stable; it not only changes as students move from high school to college to graduate school to a profession, but also differs significantly from discipline to discipline. For example, I used to say with some assurance that in academic discourse (as compared to, for example, journalism or business writing) we use standard citation conventions (MLA, APA, Turabian) when we incorporate other peoples' exact words into our writing and also when we use their ideas, theories, discoveries, etc.--unless those ideas are "common knowledge." But I am no longer sure that we always do this, and I have come to realize that the differences between fields over what and when to document are more substantial than quibbles about where the date goes.

One thing that we do have in common is that we all allow the "lifting" of some material without attribution in certain kinds of writing. When writing grant proposals, for example, we insert "boilerplate" wherever possible, i.e. for descriptions of the institution, of existing programs, and of active participants. This is not construed as "plagiarism" because the material is not deemed significant in that context (although if a student copied the same material into an assigned paper, many English faculty would consider it plagiarism.) But what is considered

significant varies from discipline to discipline much more than I expected. For example, some of the engineering professors in our discussions did not consider it plagiarism for students to copy the "procedure" section from a lab manual into the "methods and materials" sections of their lab reports--although the engineering professors did think it preferable that students change the verbs from the imperative to the past indicative.[2] For them, this appropriation of material was acceptable boilerplate. This is a substantial difference from how English professors tend to view this kind of "lifting"--a difference based I think on the ways in which our different disciplines create and transmit knowledge.[3]

A similar substantial difference between disciplines can be seen surrounding the issue of citations in and of textbooks. In most fields, common knowledge in the field is compressed into textbooks. There is a typical textbook narrative voice, abstract and impersonal, that implies that the information conveyed is true, and often that it is uncontested.[4] Only textbooks in some fields--particularly rhetoric or communications--indicate that they are presenting the textbook author's particular version of the discipline and use endnotes to document the sources of information and the progression of knowledge. Textbooks in the sciences and engineering typically imply that most of the information they contain is common knowledge--information that everyone in the field knows--and thus they contain few if any citations. After all, what if we had to cite Newton or Leibniz

every time we mentioned calculus? In turn, students in science and engineering feel, and some of their professors agree, that material drawn from a textbook need not be cited unless the exact words of the textbook are used, and sometimes not even then, since material in a textbook is by definition "common knowledge." Again, not many English professors would agree. I simply did not expect this kind of disagreement.

Surely I am not alone in my ignorance about what is standard practice in other disciplines. Nor am was I alone, I strongly suspect, in believing that the conventions of my discipline are the conventions of "academic discourse" in general. We are only beginning to understand the epistemological differences between professional discourses, through studies like those compiled in Charles Bazerman and James Paradis's Textual Dynamics of the Professions. Most teachers of composition have very little direct knowledge of the conventions and assumptions of the discourses of, say, civil engineering; few of us have much experience using those discourses. Thus, unless we know otherwise, we tend to teach our own discipline's rules as general standards. Unless I happen to know about differences or unless I can see them (as I can see that engineering reports are divided into clear subsections, whereas English papers are not), I tend to believe that practices in other fields are the same as, not different than, practices in my own. After all, we all write "academic discourse," don't we? And while these differences between discourses may be crucial, they are not always readily

apparent. For example, I learned about the differences in fair use and attribution only when asked to sit on an interdisciplinary panel presentation concerning plagiarism, an invitation proffered after a year and a half of my regular attendance at interdisciplinary discussions of fair attribution and other ethical issues. I thought that by then I understood at least the most important differences between disciplinary discourses. However, as I outlined what I thought was a blandly non-controversial summary of our "common practices" concerning attribution, I realized, to my surprise, that the instruction on plagiarism that I had been offering in my composition classes was inappropriate for lab report writing, and therefore was useless to my students. Since students found my instructions not particularly applicable to what they considered their most important work, of course they soon dismissed them from their minds. But often this was the only instruction about plagiarism that they received. My fellow panelists, at the same time, found that their students were ignorant about plagiarism because few faculty in their fields addressed the issue, thinking that it had been adequately covered in composition or elsewhere.

I used to dismiss differences in conventions between disciplines as interesting but not very consequential, to see them as merely cosmetic differences within essentially the same discourse. But in questions like fair use and attribution, the differences are not trivial. They are profound, since they touch on questions of value and ethics, and since they reveal

contradictory assumptions about the nature of knowledge. The significance of these differences may be overlooked if we focus only on variations of manners or conventions. My point here is not to deplore the practices of other fields--not yet, anyway. But I want to insist that these are crucial differences in how we construct and transmit knowledge. My first inclination, given my commitment to writing across the curriculum, is to add "how plagiarism is defined" to my list of differences among professional discourses and to teach my students that the definition of fair use varies not just between the academy and various other professions but within the academy itself. The premise on which many contemporary composition courses rest is the assumption that the differences among professional discourses are value free: we do it this way, they do it that way, and it is important to learn to "switch codes" as we move from field to field. I want to problematize that assumption a bit, moving to still another difference of discourse conventions, appropriate authorial voice, an issue about which I am a little more willing to deplore what those people in t)) other buildings do.

Hiding away under my rug is the nagging suspicion--no, certainty--that tropes I deem acceptable and even preferable are not acceptable in other disciplines. For example, in recent years writing in Rhetoric and Composition has become increasingly anecdotal and personal, as we strive to break down the borders between private and public discourse. This paper, for instance, not only uses personal anecdotes, but has a consciously personal

voice. In contrast, the laboratory report, one of the most privileged forms of writing in science and engineering, almost consistently eschews the personal and anecdotal and includes only what is deemed to be repeatable and generalizable. Students are permitted to bring "I" into a report only under extraordinary circumstances, and much of what science and engineering students learn over their undergraduate years is how to report on experiments with the air of "objectivity" and "impersonality" appropriate to their disciplines. The passive voice is often preferred to the active voice because it diverts emphasis from the individual experimenter or writer.

If I consider the differences between writing in the Humanities and writing in Engineering as merely stylistic, I don't really have much of a problem. I can help students discover the different conventions among disciplines and advise them to model their discourse accordingly, even though I run the risk of reducing my role as teacher to, as Gary Tate characterizes it, "shaping and fitting students to perform their appointed tasks as good little workers in the various artificial--and some would say oppressive--academic/administrative divisions that constitute the modern American university" (320). I can--as I have done--drop my scorn for the passive voice and join my engineering friends in jeering at the prejudice in favor of my discipline that limits the usefulness of grammar checking programs to engineering professors and their students because they pick up passive constructions along with agreement errors.

I can join Mark Waldo in considering the attempt to privilege the conventions of my own field to be elitist: "Physics would probably not presume to impose its goal or community on English; why then should English presume to impose its goal or community on physics?" (24).

If we are dealing with merely stylistic differences, it does not really matter very much if "academic discourse" dissolves from unity to multiplicity; I can change the term "discourse" to "discourses" and proceed to teach them. However, if these different discourse conventions carry some moral weight, I find myself in a quandary. If I conceive of the increasing personalization of writing in the Humanities as a good thing, as a better thing than pretending to an objectivity that is not reachable, indeed as a stylistic indication of my recognition of the fluidity and subjectivity of knowledge--then how can I teach these disciplinary conventions as if they were merely differences in manners? Of course I can always fall back on teaching my students to critique such claims to objective knowledge and to recognize--and even to try to root out--those claims in the discourse of their disciplines; but that is not what either Lindemann or the engineering school have in mind, I'm afraid. And it is, indeed, suspiciously similar to the belle-lettristic approach that Lindemann and many of the proponents of writing across the curriculum--myself included--have tried to put behind us.

What I am getting at here, albeit reluctantly, is that if

there is no such thing as academic discourse, the implications of its absence cannot be obviated by changing "discourse" to "discourses" and teaching a bunch of them. What we have here is not merely a variety of styles and shapes that we can acknowledge and teach; underlying those styles and shapes are significantly different conceptions of truth and value, conceptions that are not only different, but contradictory. The old question of whether Composition should be taught in English departments at this point is turning into the question of whether Composition can or should be taught by Composition faculty (Waldo, 22-25). And I for one am unwilling that we should give it up, not only because our jobs depend on it, and not only because of the enormous efforts over the past decade or two to professionalize Composition and to articulate it as a discipline. I want us to keep on teaching composition because I think our students benefit from exposure to our particular conceptions of truth and value in ways potentially more significant than they would from still another course devoted to vocational training. I think we need to explore the idea that the value of the discourse we teach students to read and write is not in its similarity to--but rather in its difference from--the discourse of most of the professionally-oriented departments.

This is a hard concept to admit and an even harder concept to sell to faculty in other disciplines, who conventionally conceive of first year composition as exclusively a service course--in service to their particular disciplinary needs. But

if we serve, for example, engineering, we may be mis-serving our own discipline. Let me give you an example from a student paper. I encountered this paper as part of a writing across the curriculum project with a metallurgical engineering professor. This student had taken my first-year composition class in the previous year, and this paper was his first lab report in his first laboratory course in his field of metallurgical engineering. The introduction to the lab report went like this:

Introduction

> Metallurgy is the science and technology of metals. A metallurgist is one who uses science and technology to develop and examine metals. In this lab, I will employ the methods of a metallurgist to examine and draw conclusions about several different types of ferrous alloys. My observations may not be absolutely correct, however they will be educated guesses or hypothesis' of how and what the steel specimens are. This is my first adventure into metallurgy so my ideas do not have as much structure as someone with more experience. However, I do believe I have given a firm argument for each case given and I ask that you try to understand my logic behind the theories I have proposed within this lab. Hopefully after reading this lab I will have proven that I have gained some skills as a metallurgist.

My response to this introduction was to outline the conventions and functions of a lab report, i.e. to say that the lab report conventionally describes only those occurrences that are repeatable and relevant to the hypothesis under examination. The introduction should introduce the specific experiment and its results, not the experimenter, the discipline, or the laboratory situation, and so forth. I was using this report as a springboard for training students in a laboratory course to improve their practice of this kind of professional discourse. My representation may have been useful in introducing the rudiments of the lab report to the group of novices who heard me, and who had had, for the most part, no previous instruction in how to write one. But the same piece of writing would look considerably different as a paper in a composition class, and my response to it would have been very different. In a composition class, I would have tried to tease out the personal meaning that the writer was trying to generate from the experience under examination, and I would have suggested strategies that would have produced a much different and to me a more interesting final product. What I am faced with here is a choice of advising the student to revise the paper in fundamentally different--and contradictory--ways. I can claim to explain that contradiction by saying that different sets of conventions apply to different discourses, but this is an uneasy compromise because it belies the institutional situation of these discourses. I know full well that the student--eager to learn the conventions of his

field and to fit into it--is probably going to privilege and imitate the conventions of the engineering lab report and to marginalize those forms that might allow him to examine the nature and limitations of his metallurgical endeavors. I can always critique the conventions of disciplines whose discourses claim this standard of objectivity and impersonality, but if I do so, I am moving away from writing across the curriculum. I am left with the uneasy question of the extent to which I compromise my integrity by trying to teach a discourse that I do not use myself and whose conventions of authorship and knowledge contradict my own.

The compromises that we make or are asked to make to accommodate the teaching of composition to the needs of other disciplines are at best uneasy, and at worst perhaps unethical, and this may explain some of the tension that often emerges in first year composition. At many schools, composition takes on the kind of Janus face of the program recently described by David Bleich: "While the publicly announced aim of the program, reluctantly overseen by members of non-English departments as well as the English department, is conventional and traditional, the students' experiences in the specific writing courses taught by both graduate students and faculty are much less so" (136). What our practice often boils down to is that we tell faculty in other departments that Composition offers students training in academic writing, we imply that the training we offer in composition will prepare students to write in their disciplines,

and we insist that we are particularly capable of imparting that training. (I use the term "training" here consciously.) To put a nastier face on it, we go along with the assumptions and expectations of the engineers, who sincerely believe that our job is to teach students to spell and to fix commas, and who wonder how we can stand to do anything so boring (to paraphrase a metallurgical engineer who visited our department last year). We hang onto the notion of "academic discourse," with or without the final "s," because claiming that we teach something common to us all is a useful--and non-controversial--way to explain to people in other disciplines that we do something other than serve as "grammar police." Then, once we have the students safely registered in our classes, we teach them, deliberately or not, consciously or not, the things we really consider important--the standards, values, and conventions of our own disciplinary discourse.

Periodically it becomes clear to faculty in other disciplines that we have not delivered on our promises, implied or overt, to prepare students for their own brand of "academic discourse," and we are accused of gross incompetence. Of course they notice that we have not taught their future professionals the rudiments of their professional discourses--not how to maintain the impersonal voice, not how to find, use, and attribute previously existing knowledge in their major fields, not how to keep a personal voice out of their texts. Even worse, we have not trained them to (for goodness sake!) spell, avoid

split infinitives, and maintain the good language manners that people in science and engineering tend to care much more about than people in English and Composition do. We are, in short, not providing the services that they expected and continue to expect, despite at least a decade of our attempts to recast expectations about what and how Composition classes teach.

These expectations linger on, I suspect, because we tend to be clearer among ourselves about what composition entails than we are when we communicate with those people in the other buildings, because it is politically precarious to insist that what we teach is valuable for students to learn but not instrumental to their professional training. Often for good reasons in times of tight budgets and widespread cutbacks, we opt for the claim that we can indeed serve two disciplines, for fear that if we did tell them what we actually do, we would run the risk of their not wanting to pay for it, in students' time and university budgets. We sell composition as "useful" and reap what rewards we can from our "service," and judging from the number of Writing Across the Curriculum based first year composition textbooks on the market, we even make some passes at teaching the discourses we do not practice. The problem with this compromise is that Rhetoric and Composition has had a long, hard fight to find space in the academy for a multiplicity of languages, for a more personal, experientially-based discourse, and for the exercise of a critical--and critiquing--intelligence. Until we admit that what we do is as useless (or use-ful) to professional training as, for

instance, the study of literature, we will be harnessed to the team of "academic discourse" and will be judged by our students' performance at modes of discourse that we do not privilege, teach, or fully understand.

Notes

1.I am certainly not alone in this reconsideration of the purpose and nature of first year composition. Indeed, Lindemann's article was immediately followed by a piece by Gary Tate advocating the teaching of literature in first year composition on the grounds that literature gives students insight into life--and writing---"Beyond the Disciplines" (321).

2. Here and in the following paragraph I am generalizing from a long, rambling discussion. There was disagreement among members of the same discipline about what constitutes fair use, and my generalizations here are not intended to be definitive. My point, though, is that differences emerged at the points where I least expected them, because I was viewing the practices of my discipline as typical of all academic discourse.

3.Seen from this perspective, scholars in the Humanities tend to more closely identify knowledge with specific individuals than do our colleagues in the sciences and engineering, who are apt to consider much more written knowledge to be in the realm of "common knowledge." It is important to realize, however, that in those fields, the most important knowledge is that which is patentable.

4.Indeed, this generalized textbook-ese may be an example of something like a prevailing academic discourse, but we don't really want our students to write like that--do we?